DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 836 FL 021 413

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TITLE Implementing Innovation in Language Education.
REPORT NO ISSN-0959-2253
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 15p.; For serial publication in which this paper appears, see FL 021 410.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics; v4 p27-39 1993

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; *Change Strategies; *Educational Change; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Instructional Innovation; Second Language Instruction

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a commentary on the problems of implementing innovation in language education, with particular reference to English language teaching. Various factors that influence adoption and implementation are considered: properties of the innovation, the transmission process, and the management of change. The overall aim of the paper is to contribute to a sounder conceptualization of the change process that will assist those involved in the management of change. Contains 24 references. (Author)

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Implementing Innovation in Language Education

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IMPLEMENTING INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Gibson Ferguson (IALS)

Abstract

This paper offers a commentary on the problems of implementing innovation with particular reference to ELT. Various factors that influence adoption and implementation are considered: properties of the innovation, the transmission process, and the management of change. The overall aim is to contribute to a sounder conceptualisation of the change process which will assist those involved in the management of change.

Change and its implementation is a topic that has attracted increased attention from the ELT profession (see White 1988, Kennedy 1988, Woods 1988, British Council 1989, 1990, 1991) . This is both unsurprising and welcome.

Unsurprising because ELT professionals are centrally involved in the management of change in various capacities: as teacher educators trying to effect change at an individual or classroom level, as curriculum developers or testers attempting to renew curricula, as managers responsible for innovation in the context of educational aid projects. Given these concerns, it was perhaps inevitable that systematic theoretical and practical enquiry would ensue.

Welcome because it is a corrective to a tendency in the profession to focus overmuch on the content of change at the expense of the process of accomplishing it.

This paper does not, and cannot, review the large literature on change. The purpose rather is to distil from the literature a number of guidelines supported by commentary. The aim is to encourage a sounder conceptualisation of the implementation of change.

1. Innovation: matters of terminology and definition

'Innovation' denotes both a process and a product. By the latter we mean an idea, artefact or practice which is new.

The literature divides the process of innovation into three phases: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Initiation is the phase when a problem is identified and a decision to change taken. Resources are then mobilized. In the implementation phase plans for change are formulated and the innovation is put into use. Institutionalization means the incorporation of the new practices into the routines of the institution. The innovation is consolidated.

A similar distinction is sometimes made between adoption and implementation. Adoption is the decision to introduce a particular innovation and implementation the

use of that implementation. Most recent research has focused on implementation (Fullan 1989).

This paper is primarily concerned with implementation, though the boundaries between the three phases are not always clearcut.

Innovation as product can be described in terms of two dimensions: depth and scale. First, depth.

Educational innovations may involve any or all of the following levels of change.

a. Structural change: e.g. changes in policy, in timetabling, in grouping of students etc. These largely pertain to the administrative arrangements for instruction.

b. Technological change: e.g. the introduction of computers, video, language laboratories etc. into the instructional process.

c. Materials change: e.g. new books, syllabuses or examinations.

d. Behavioural change: e.g. changes in what teachers do in the classroom, in their teaching style and behaviours.

e. Change in belief, attitude, understanding: e.g. change in teacher's beliefs about, or understanding of, teaching and learning.

Real change in education has an impact on the interaction between teacher and learner in the classroom. Changes in organisational set-up or in materials will tend to be relatively superficial unless accompanied by change in teachers' behaviour and belief. We might say, then, that changes lower in the list (d. and e.) are more fundamental than those higher up. Change in teacher belief or behaviour is also relatively more difficult to accomplish because it is more personal, because classrooms are private environments and because beliefs are sometimes not outwardly manifest.

The innovative process is a process, however, and one should not expect, therefore, that change at the various levels will occur simultaneously. Understanding and commitment will typically grow in the course of successful implementation. It is quite normal, as Fullan (1989) points out, for behavioural change to precede change in understanding or belief rather than vice versa. Mastery of a new technique may lead into a change of attitude - a point of relevance to in-service teacher education.

The second dimension of innovation is its scale. Innovations vary greatly in how widely they are implemented and in the numbers of people involved. The range may be from a single individual in one institution to an entire national system of education. In the world of private sector ELT, innovation tends to be relatively small scale, involving groups of individuals trying out new ideas in their institution. World Bank sponsored projects, on the other hand, tend to be large scale, involving thousands of people across a whole nation. Implementation processes differ accordingly - with management considerations having greater salience in large scale projects.

There are similarities, however. As Fullan (1989:9) points out, the effectiveness of even quite large change projects

> .....stands or falls with the degree to which front-line implementers (i.e. individual teachers) use new practices with some degree of mastery, commitment, and understanding.

In this paper, we are primarily, but not exclusively, concerned with change on a larger scale than that involving a few individuals in a single institution but on a smaller scale than a national project. Some of what is said may, however, have relevance to change projects at either extremity of the cline. We also need to distinguish between specific innovations and clusters of innovations. The latter are often called reforms. Finally, the focus of change may be a specific innovation (e.g. a new examination) or an enhancement of organisational capacity, or both - though it is usual for one or the other to take priority.

2. Conceptualising change

Before discussing factors affecting implementation, it may be useful to make a number of initial observations on the phenomenon of educational change.

2.1 'Innovation' is a seductive term. Its political economy, however, is such that the likely benefits are often oversold to gain acceptance and resources (Hurst 1983). The reality is that many innovations deliver less than is initially promised. Some turn out to be worthless, and a few are motivated less by an interest in solving problems than by a lust for the social cachet of innovativeness. Faced with claims for innovation, there is, therefore, some justification for caution and scepticism.

Innovation is also sometimes politically motivated and this can mean (i) that too many changes are introduced at once in an ill-coordinated way, and (ii) that changes are introduced prematurely before proper trialling. The result may be that teachers are overloaded. It would be appropriate in this situation to attempt to scale down the scope of change.

2.2 When innovations fail, teachers are often blamed. They are said to resist change. The phrase has a superficial explanatory allure, but is ultimately unproductive. First, it is value loaded in that it assumes the innovation is good and opposition wrong. It thereby delegitimises dissent, which may, of course, be perfectly well-founded either because the idea is not so good after all or because circumstantial factors impede its implementation. More seriously, it is reductive in positing a sort of blind non-rationality on the part of teachers. It seems to pre-empt further enquiry.

As Hurst (1981:185) observes, greater success in implementation will accrue to '.....strategies that postulate rational and logical factors'. It will do so because they are better able to uncover the root causes of difficulty and suggest measures for overcoming them. A practical corollary is that if a teacher attending a teacher education course says, 'it wouldn't work in my class', we will have to accept that s/he is probably right - rather than talk self-righteously of resistance.

The wider point is that is that we need to examine change from the 'inside', to adopt a phenomenological perspective that enquires into the meaning the recipient brings to the new information.

2.3 Change usually involves loss, anxiety and risk. There is the risk of a loss of classroom control, and of disapproval from students, peers and authority. There is the 'burden of initial incompetence' (Macdonald and Rudduck 1971) as the teacher abandons the familiar and fumbles with the new. Trying out something new can also bring an uncomfortable exposure. Being in a trial, Shipman notes, often means being on trial. All this means that innovation is demanding. It takes effort and time; time to acquire clarity about what is involved.

2.4 When they first emerge, innovations are seldom fully adapted to their contexts of proposed use. A period of trial, experimentation and adaptation is usually required. The innovating agency should be tolerant of reinterpretation, and of the different versions of the change that emerge from user's adaptations. Success in implementation is not to be measured, then, by degree of compliance but by successful adaptation at 'street level'. Fidelity to original conception is in general negatively related to successful implementation.

3. Factors in the implementation of change

Success in implementing change depends on three categories of factors: the nature of the innovation itself, the transmission of the innovation and the management of change.

Perhaps the most important is the innovation itself. Some viewpoints assign the greatest importance to the transmission process but in so doing they devalue the critical reasoning capacities of the target audience. They claim implicitly that if we communicate the idea effectively, all will be well. But this is not so. The innovation may be rejected on account of its failings. Additionally, we may question the assumption that all innovation is exogenous and therefore stands in need of dissemination.

Another viewpoint that acceptance of change is in some way contingent on the character of the receiving agency, be it an individual or an institution, has led to an unproductive search for characteristics of a psychological or sociological kind that correlate consistently with innovativeness. However, the dependent variable, a stable propensity to accept or reject innovations, is as Hurst (1983:43) suggests, probably mythical. People do not, any more than institutions, conveniently divide into those habitually adopting and those habitually rejecting innovations. A more plausible view is that one and the same individual or institution may be both welcoming of or resistant to change depending on its nature.

Again, we are driven back to the properties of the innovation as determinants of its acceptability. So, a suitable question is - what are the conditions that enhance acceptability?

4. Innovations: conditions for acceptance

Several writers suggest that potential adopters assess innovations according to some cost-benefit calculus. The following are important elements in the calculation.

The change should offer a relative advantage over existing practice, and the probability of the alleged benefits accruing should be high. The change should also be cost efficient; that is, the ratio of benefit to effort should be better than existing practice. Innovations which require consistently more work but offer relatively few gains over existing practice are unlikely to enjoy success.

The change should be perceived as beneficial and feasible in terms of adopter's value systems and working conditions. Innovations are more readily adopted to the extent that they are congruent with existing values and practices. Those which embody unfamiliar values or require a radical reconceptualisation of teaching style have a correspondingly reduced chance of successful diffusion. Macdonald and Rudduck (1971) show how the dissemination of the Humanities Curriculum Project was made more difficult by the unfamiliarity of the teacher's role as neutral chairman of discussion.

A related point is that complexity and ambition can impede successful implementation. Complex innovations are those which require substantial amounts of unlearning-relearning, and ambitious ones are those where the scope of the change is large in relation to the capacity of the receiving system, where large numbers of people are involved, and whose maintenance is time-consuming and elaborate. Ahrens (1991) notes, for example, that one of the causes for the breakdown of the Gujerat Radio INSET project was that '.....the degree of ELT innovation was too big'. The lesson may be that the 'alternative of grandeur' (Havelock and Huberman 1977) should be eschewed in favour of smaller scale, more incremental change.

The risks of change should be reasonable to participants. One way of reducing perceived risk is to allow potential adopters to observe the innovation in use in 'real' classrooms. Huberman (1973) suggests that teachers tend to be more favourable to innovations that they can see put to work in the classroom. Another way is to provide opportunities for trialling the innovation on a limited basis, again in a 'real' classroom.

The innovation should be perceived as practical (Doyle and Ponder 1977). For teachers, this means it should possess the following attributes:

- it should have instrumental content; in other words, describe procedures that have a direct, realistic classroom application. The innovation proposal should not confine itself to rationales or descriptions of abstract principles. It should address 'how to' concerns.

- it should have efficiency, meaning a better yield per unit of effort than existing practice.

- the credentials of the innovation advocates should be credible to teachers. They should be seen as having relevant or comparable experience to the teachers themselves.

Another feature of practicality is that benefits should emerge fairly early in the history of the change project. Teachers, like other people, are in general not good at accepting initial discomfort for deferred benefits.

5. The transmission of innovation

Success in implementation may be influenced by the transmission process; how the idea is communicated to the target audience. There are various models of the transmission process (e.g. Havelock 1969), and an influential typology of strategies for implementing change (Chin and Benne 1969).

We shall not review these here because they have been described elsewhere (e.g. White 1988), and because, although they are useful conceptualisations, they offer few clear guidelines for the practitioner. We can say, however, that there appears to be a basic division of dissemination models into those which see innovation in centre-periphery terms with innovation emerging from a central agency and those which stress the active role of the periphery in initiating innovation.

Among the latter are school-based curriculum innovation movements. Innovations developed at school level largely circumvent the problems of dissemination, and are advantaged in being closer to the point of implementation. This allows for a better fit between the innovation and its context and may encourage a sense of involvement and ownership, which some writers (e.g. Kennedy 1989) stress is important to successful implementation. On the other hand, the assumption that there are sufficient time, resources and expertise at school level to carry out a programme of innovation is often not met in developing countries. Maintaining the existing system is often quite enough of a struggle.

Strategies for implementing change differ in terms of the degree of coercion applied. The most forceful, 'power-coercive strategies' (Chin and Benne 1969), typically involve change imposed from above through, for example, examination reform or ministry circulars. Such methods can produce quick results, particularly in societies accustomed to authoritarian practice. But they are not reliable because they do not guarantee the internalization of the innovation by teachers who, because they work in private settings, may discontinue implementation once external pressure is lifted or distracted elsewhere.

At the other end of the continuum are strategies that coopt teachers into the innovative process and seek to bring about attitudinal change by methods that are almost psychotherapeutic. Whilst these approaches are welcome for their more participatory nature and their attention to the norms that guide practice, they are over-optimistic in their assumption that conflicts of interest can be reconciled. If the target population takes an unfavourable view of the innovation, there may ultimately be little the change agent can do.

Participation is similarly not an unqualified 'good'. Its merits in creating a sense of ownership, in helping to eliminate inappropriate innovations, can hardly be denied. However, it can also be time-consuming and divisive because, as Hurst (1983:19 suggests, it can '....exacerbate and polarise differences of opinion'.

6. In-service teacher training

One of the main vehicles for disseminating educational change is in-service teacher training. The question is not whether this is required but what precise form the training should take.

A conventional form of training is the pre-implementation workshop. Often, this takes place off-site away from the school. It also typically involves a type of instruction that has been labelled 'transmission' (Breen and Candlin 1989). The trainer assumes a missionary role and the trainees for their part are obliged to have faith (ibid.).

This form of training may be quite satisfactory for raising awareness, but for a number of reasons it is of little help in implementing change. First, it is only when teachers actually begin to implement change that they experience the most specific doubts and questions. And it is then that anxiety is at its greatest. This argues the need for continuing support and advice during, as well as prior to, implementation. Otherwise, confidence can quickly evaporate.

Breen and Candlin (1989) also point out that there is typically a gap in thought and action between the workshop and the classroom. Implementation of a new idea is better regarded as a process of trial, evaluation and adaptation which ideally requires extended contact between teacher and trainer. Thus, the 'one shot' workshop with no provision for follow up of attempts at innovation is unlikely to be effective.

There is a further reason for sustained support during implementation. Fullan (1982) argues that major behavioural change requires resocialization, the basis for which is continued interaction over time. Interaction need not only be with experts. Given the finding (Fullan 1982) that teachers often prefer to turn to colleagues rather than external specialists for advice, peers also have an important role. Collegiality, and openness in the classroom, are important assets, then. Both require a climate of trust and support.

In-service-training for innovation is sometimes held to be more effective (Breen and Candlin 1989) if it relates directly to the experiences and problems of teachers in schools, and if it is primarily the teachers themselves that set the agenda for training. It is more effective because (a) it brings the development of the innovation closer to its point of use, relating it more directly to classroom reality, and (b) it helps develop a sense of ownership in relation to the innovation. Both enhance the likelihood of its long term survival and institutionalization.

Training in this view, then, should support the teachers' efforts at innovating in response to their problems, and should be seen as a longer term 'investigative process' (Breen and Candlin 1989:135). The problem is, however, that this long term investigative approach may be prohibitively costly in a situation of economic stringency. It also depends on a degree of teacher confidence and initiative that may not be forthcoming where there is habitual passivity in the face of 'expert authority'. The challenge for the change manager is to evolve modalities of training which respect cost and cultural constraints, which deliver long term support for attempts at innovation, but which avoid the deficiencies of 'transmission training'.

There are implications in this for the location of training for innovation. In- school training is probably preferable. Off-site training removes the participant from the preoccupations of daily life, and this may help concentration where awareness-raising is the objective. But it also means training away from the social reality of the school. A possible consequence is that the enthusiastic but solitary messenger returning from an INSETT course may find it difficult to convince colleagues of the practicality of the new idea, and to persuade them that the risks are worthwhile.

The best form of in-service training for innovation, then, is that which is on-going through the implementation process, that which takes place close to the point of implementation, that which involves demonstration of new practice as well as explanation and feedback on change attempts, that which offers opportunities for practice and trial, and that which comes in a variety of forms: workshops, frequent consultant visits, informal peer conferences.

7. The role of the school principal

Fullan (1989:15) points out that the school or institution is the level of organisation which is closest to the individual implementer, most salient in his daily life, and as such it '....presents the most powerful set of immediate conditions determining the degree of change (or non-change)'.

It is not surprising then that research evidence (Fullan 1982) assigns the school principal an important role in the implementation of change. The active support of the principal is vital, for, in Fullan's words (1982:71), his actions '.....serve to legitimate whether a change is to be taken seriously and to support teachers both psychologically and with resources'.

Support needs to extend beyond verbal endorsement to actions such as securing the assistance of consultants, arranging additional resources where necessary, protecting implementers from excessive demands on their time, and recognising and rewarding implementer efforts. In general, effective change requires a combination of pressure and support, and the school principal may be a source of both.

8. The management of innovation

Hurst (1983) points out that innovative projects have an experimental character in that a considerable period of trial and adaptation is often necessary to achieve a better fit between innovation, user and context. This distinguishes the management of innovation from management as the routine maintenance and administration of existing systems. Different managerial skills are required.

What is needed above all in innovation is the monitoring of implementation. Participants' reactions need to be monitored and procedures established for conveying information from individual teachers to administrators and facilitators. Then corrective action can be taken to overcome inevitable difficulties and disincentives. Hurst (1983) identifies three kinds of corrective action:

(a) better communication to improve participants' understanding of the innovation (e.g. additional in-service assistance)

(b) modification of the innovation to suit users' requirements

(c) assistance for adaptation of the innovation by users (perhaps by adding to users' resources).

If the innovation continues to prove unworkable or unpopular, it should be abandoned as not such a good idea after all.

The emphasis on monitoring contrasts with much common practice where too much attention is given to the initial design and dissemination of change at the expense of implementation. Hurst (1981) points out that it is a profound mistake to think that all difficulties can be foreseen in advance. The inevitability of unforeseen difficulty needs to be accepted. What is important is that there is a swift response to implementation problems, and this implies the retention of contingency reserves of time and resources. It also requires short flexible chains of command.

To participate in innovation is to incur risks. Part of the business of management is to reduce risks and disincentives to acceptable levels. One way of doing so is to provide opportunities to observe and trial the innovation on a limited basis. Pilot projects in the first phase of an innovative programme are a common and effective device for early identification of areas where adaptation is needed and for more realistic estimates of risks. However, successful pilot projects do not guarantee successful dissemination elsewhere. In fact, because they generally receive special attention, they are, to use Crossley's words (1984:84), 'doomed to success'.

The converse of reducing risks is strengthening incentives. Several writers (e.g. Woods 1988, Kennedy 1989, Morrison 1990) point out that incentives are an essential ingredient in programmes of innovation. From the outset participants need incentives to set against the risks, and if motivation falters during implementation, these may need to be strengthened. Woods (1988), among others, suggests that with funded aid projects one kind of incentive could be the offer of scholarships for overseas study.

9. Projects and sustainability

In recent years much large scale innovation in ELT has been implemented through funded aid projects, particularly in developing countries. This often means special project inputs: a project secretariat, project vehicles, overseas consultants, project photocopiers, and so on. The motivation for 'projectisation' is understandable: to establish an enclave against a hostile economic or social environment, and to implement change according to a coherent plan.

This approach has several disadvantages, however. Special inputs may guarantee short term success, but when they are withdrawn, the programme may collapse: the problem of sustainability (British Council 1989,1990).

A second problem is that if the project bypasses regular administrative channels, it may fail through underutilisation to develop their capacity for administration,

research, policy analysis, and evaluation (King 1991). In other words, it may fail to develop institutional capacity, a theme of increasing importance on the agenda of many aid agencies. If one accepts that a strong local institutional capacity is supportive of a self-sustaining and independent change programme, then the lesson for the ELT innovator is that he should work as far as possible through existing administrative channels.

Sustainability of innovation may be enhanced in the following ways:

- The scope of the innovation should not be too large for local resources to sustain after the withdrawal of project inputs. Innovation research (Fullan 1982) consistently indicates that very high levels of external support are negatively related to the long term institutionalization of change.

- Local participants need, as Woods (1988) remarks, to be involved in the innovation process, thereby developing a sense of ownership of the innovation.

- There should be incentives to sustain the motivation of local participants and to offset the inevitable risks and losses.

- Support for teachers' efforts at innovation should be scheduled over long time periods.

- Collegiality and teacher support networks should be developed through, for example, teacher newsletters and the construction of teacher resource centres.

- Realistic time horizons for even modest change should be set. Because senior administrators tend to be oriented more to results than implementation, they sometimes underestimate the time needed for the implementation and routinization of innovations. The result may be perfunctory training, hasty decisions, misinterpreted communication, and exhaustion brought on by the effort of coping with unrealistic deadlines on top of routine work. If innovations are to endure, there needs to be an adequate period of settling in when the new idea is routinized; what Hoyle (1972) calls 'refreezing'.

Perhaps the greatest threat to sustainability is overdependence on external resources. We should then be perhaps thinking less in terms of sustaining innovation beyond the life of a project and more in terms of building institutional capacity. As a UNDP report (1992:16) says:

> Few developing countries have the capacity to formulate, plan, implement and manage .....programmes - and to incorporate these programmes into their overall human development efforts. This inadequacy is often perceived as one of the main obstacles to implementing sustainable human development policies and programmes.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that though they are less tractable to management, qualities such as vision and commitment are important in implementing change. Also, perseverance, patience, and attention to detail are essential in implementing the implementation plan (Fullan 1989).

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Several accounts of innovation (e.g. Ahrens 1990) acknowledge that the commitment of key personnel significantly influences the likelihood of successful implementation. Commitment, however, implies stability of project leadership, and, thus, where there is a high staff turnover there may be adverse consequences. These may be reduced by relating responsibilities to positions rather than persons, by encouraging a spread of implementation reponsibilities, and by bearing in mind the importance of continuity in evaluating transfer requests. In general, the organisation of the project needs to be robust and flexible enough to cope with inevitable staff changes in a long term project, and with an unpredictable or turbulent wider environment.

10. Conclusion

Implementing change is essentially a practical skill that experience refines. Practice can, however, also be improved by a better conceptualization of the change process. Indeed, Fullan (1982) argues that a sound conceptualization is an important ingredient of managerial expertise along with subject knowledge and interpersonal skills.

The main purpose of this paper has been to contribute to such a conceptualization by drawing on the theoretical literature and available case studies. Accounts of good practice, and of failure, will continue to have useful place in the improvement of change management in ELT. They can extend the experience of the profession and provide a background of shared referents for analytic discussion. And they make it possible for future commentators to distil more sensitive guidelines for implementing change.

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